Fractured

A Historical Analysis of the Healing of Pierre de Rudder, Lourde's Most Famous Miracle

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ABSTRACT

Pierre de Rudder, a Belgian laborer who severely fractured his leg in 1867, claimed to have undergone an instantaneous healing eight years later while visiting the Shrine to Our Lady of Lourdes in Oostakker. The miracle quickly became celebrated across Western Europe and was easily one of the most well-known healings associated with the Lourdes shrine. With such notoriety came an equal amount of controversy from the medical community as rationalists pushed back on the legitimacy of the miracle. An extensive debate between Lourdes's apologists and its critics ensued during the turn of the 20th century, resulting in a stalemate that left more questions than answers. The healing of de Rudder remains controversial to this day despite its elevated status at the Lourdes shrine.

Keywords: Lourdes, miracle, Catholic, Pierre de Rudder, faith healing, Belgium, Christianity, Our Lady

Lourdes, France has been a bastion for Catholic pilgrimage ever since 14-year-old Bernadette Soubirous claimed that the Virgin Mary appeared to her on dozens of occasions in 1858. In the century and a half that has followed, millions of faithful Christians travel to the site every year. Many of the devout believe that the water of the site's grotto was blessed by the Virgin and contains healing properties, being told that consuming or bathing in the holy water can lead to remarkable recoveries from illness through the Blessed Mother's intercession.[1]

Claims of miraculous healing would become so commonplace at Lourdes that an official medical bureau was set up in 1883 to investigate these reported recoveries. This *Bureau des Constatations Médicales* was made up of physicians of various disciplines, applying standards of medical investigation contemporary to the day in order to decipher credible claims of healing from those that were more likely to be natural. The modern Medical Bureau of Lourdes was established in 1905 and operates using revitalized standards previously instituted by Pope Benedict XIV.[2] The bureau refrains from declaring any cure to be "miraculous", a right reserved only for the bishop of the diocese in which the cured person resides. The job of the medical panelists is more nuanced; the bureau is to rule out potential natural explanations that could preclude a divine cause, only recommending to the Church that a particular cure is inexplicable.

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[1] For an overview of the history of Lourdes and the alleged miracles in its affiliation, see Cranston, Ruth *The Miracle of Lourdes* (New York: Doubleday) 1988; and Harris, Ruth *Lourdes, Body and Spirit in the Secular Age* (New York: Penguin Books, 1999). A quantitative analysis of Lourdes's cures by decade is laid out in François, Bernard, Esther M. Sternberg, and Elizabeth Fee. "The Lourdes Medical Cures Revisited." *Journal of the History of Medicine and Allied Sciences* 69, no. 1 (2014): 135-162.

[2] Dichoso, Travis Jon. "Lourdes: A Uniquely Catholic Approach to Medicine." *The Linacre Quarterly* 82, no. 1 (2015): 8-12.

given current medical knowledge. Inexplicability is only one of many qualities that a miracle cure must possess; a true miracle must have involved an illness that was serious, organic, and growing progressively worse, followed by an instantaneous and complete cure that is lasting in its duration and not the result of any medical treatment. Extensive medical documentation overviewing both the illness' diagnosis and its subsequent cure must be reviewed by the bureau before any deliberation can be made, a process that often takes over a decade from start to finish.[3] With roughly 50 case files opened every year, thousands of cures have been deemed "medically remarkable", though as of 2023, only 70 instances have been given the label of "miraculous" since the 19th century.[4]

The quality of these 70 cures varies greatly. The first half-century of the bureau's institution was frequently plagued by a lack of standards of investigation, "Medical practice in Lourdes, in the years before Boissarie's tenure [turn of the 19th century], was marked by poor documentation and hastily registered conclusions."[5] Some of the approved cures were for illnesses like cancer or tuberculosis that can, albeit rarely, go into spontaneous remission naturally. A large variety involves neurological disorders that were difficult to diagnose before the Second World War, resulting in "many diagnoses remain[ing] dubious for lack of appropriate criteria and follow- up."[6] A criticism can also be given to the ways in which the Bureau's criteria are applied, as there are multiple cases in which a miracle was approved despite the cure being neither instantaneous nor complete.[7] In at least one case, a patient died after their disease relapsed 16 years after their initial cure at Lourdes.[8]

These criticisms are nearly as old as the Lourdes shrine itself. Most famous was the rationalist Emile Zola's comment that "The road to Lourdes is littered with crutches, but not one wooden leg."[9] The critique is obvious in its implications: critics essentially argued that all of Lourdes's cures are relatively mundane and do not involve an impossible cure whose diagnosis was unmistakable. Though Zola is correct that there are no documented amputees healed in the

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[3] Ibid.

[4] An online catalogue of each Lourdes cure can be accessed at 'List of Approved Miracles'. The Miracle Hunter, 2015. https://www.miraclehunter.com/marian_apparitions/approved_apparitions/lourdes/miracles1.html. Retrieved on April 15h, 2023.

[5] Francois, et al. "Lourdes Medical Cures"

[6] Ibid.

[7] The cures of Vittorio Micheli and Deliza Cirolli, both involving cancers that led to the patient's immobility, were approved as miraculous despite the tumors shrinking gradually and the pilgrims only being able to gain their ability to walk with great convalescence. Even following remission, Vittorio still walked with a limp treated with orthopedic shoes and Delizia required corrective surgery to repair her gait. Here it seems the qualifications for a cure's "instantaneity" and "completeness" are more malleable than the bureau would like to grant. For further discussion, see Garner, Jim. "Spontaneous Regressions: Scientific Documentation as a Basis for the Declaration of Miracles." *Canadian Medical Association Journal* 111, no. 11 (1974): 1254-1264; Dowling, John. "Lourdes Cures and Their Medical Assessment." *Journal of the Royal Society of* Medicine 77, no. 8 (1984): 634-638; and Randi, James. *The Faith Healers*. Prometheus Books, 1987.

[8] This was the case with Ginette Nouvell, the 60th approved Lourdes miracle, who underwent a gradual recovery after her Budd-Chiari disease went into remission following a pilgrimage to Lourdes in 1954. The cure was approved by the bureau 1961, though Ginette would later pass away from complications after her illness relapsed in 1970.

[9] Zola, Emile. *Lourdes*. Rome, 1894

grottos of the Lourdes shrine (such cases have, however, been recorded at other Marian sites),[10] one will find in the annals of Lourdes some cases that are difficult to attribute to diagnostic error. Included among these are cases of individuals with visible tubercular facial disfigurements instantly healed,[11] shortened legs measured in controlled conditions suddenly lengthening,[12] and quadriplegics with verified nerve damage suddenly regaining full mobility despite extensive muscle atrophy.[13]

Among the most impressive of these cures is that of Pierre de Rudder, who claimed to have been instantaneously healed of a visibly fractured leg through the intercession of Our Lady of Lourdes. Both the most well-known and most controversial of Lourdes's amalgamation of healing reports, the story of Pierre de Rudder has magnetized the attention of the saint and the skeptic alike. Lourdes's most eminent cure is also one of its earliest, allegedly occurring in 1875 and being certified as the eighth official miracle in 1908. Ironically, the cure itself did not occur on the premises of the Lourdes grotto; in fact, the patient had never even visited the shrine to begin with, instead opting to attend a local Belgian replica of the Lourdes shrine.[14] The case is complicated, having twists and turns throughout. One may think of it as a tennis match, with apologists and skeptics punting arguments to and fro. Every argument has a rebuttal, and for each rebuttal, there follows a counter-rebuttal. No consensus has been reached well over a century later. This is frustrating for the apologist yet intriguing for those attempting to study the case objectively. Here I shall lay out the miracle and the sources that accompany it, followed by the potential historical explanations to explain the facts of the case.

The Miracle

Born in 1822 in the Jabbeke municipality of Belgium, Pierre de Rudder worked as a laborer in a forest owned by a Senator of the day, the Viscount Albéric du Bus de Gisignies.[15] On February

[10] The Basilica of Our Lady of the Pillar in Zaragoza, Spain, boasts of the healing of amputee Miguel Pellicer in 1640. Two dozen witnesses, including the surgeons who had performed the amputation of Miguel's right leg two years prior, testified under oath that the man had been previously limbless. Primary sources for this miracle are thoroughly reviewed in Deroo, Andre. *L'homme à la Jambe Coupée: Ou Le Plus Etonnant Miracle de Notre-Dame del Pilar.* Fayard, 1959; and Messiori, Vittorio. *Il Miracolo. Spagna, 1640: Indagine Sul Più Sconvolgente Prodigio Mariano*. Rizzoli. 1999.

[11] As was the case with Marie Lemarchand as discussed in Glynn, Paul. *Healing Fire of Christ: Reflections on Modern Miracles-- Knock, Lourdes, Fatima.* Ignatius Press, 2003, pg. 187-189.

[12] In reference to one of Lourdes unofficial healings, that of the Renauld sisters. See Boissiere, Gustave. *Les Grandes Guérisons de Lourdes* (Paris: Duniol) 1900, pg. 353-359

[13] Among the best-known example was disabled veteran of the First World War, John Traynor. See Glynn*, Healing Fire*, pg. 59-74.

[14] Though distant healing is the exception to the rule, other outliers of this kind exist such as the cure of Marie Margurite who was healed overnight of pyelonephritis after replacing her medication with Lourdes water in 1937.

[15] The de Rudder case is discussed in a substantial number of books on the Lourdes shrine. Most important is the contemporary work by Canon De Meester, A. *De Wonderbare Genezing van Pieter De Rudder; Kanoniek het Onderzoek.* (Oostakker: Geloofsonderricht) 1957, who was the promoter of the miracle during inquiries of 1907 and 1908. Likewise exhaustive is George Bertrin's work *Histoire Critique des Evénements de Lourdes, Apparitions et Guérisons* (Paris: Librairie Lecoffre) 1912, pg. 164-185, written by the head physician of the Lourdes Medical Bureau. The primary sources deriving from affidavits, letters, and transcripts of witness testimony are quoted in both of these works, though the earliest publication of these documents were produced in a book that was published the

16th, 1867, Pierre's left leg was crushed by a falling tree, causing a severe fracture of the tibia and fibula about nine inches below the kneecap. The man was operated on for several weeks by Oudenbourg physician Dr. Affenaer, but multiple surgeries failed at repairing the fracture and several centimeters of bone were removed, leaving the bone disconnected and agape with a three-centimeter gap separating the two pieces. A large wound became profound around the fracture five weeks later as the leg began to decay. Amputation was recommended, a treatment which Pierre adamantly refused. He remained largely bed-bound and had to have his pus-soaked bandages changed several times a day by his immediate family. Around 14 months later his condition improved enough for him to appear publicly in May 1868, using crutches to feebly hobble around to attend mass. For the next eight years, Pierre was routinely seen by several physicians from Bruges but was considered largely incurable. Luckily, the Catholic was able to receive worker's compensation in the form of a disability pension of 7.80 francs a week.

As the years went on, Pierre frequently requested a paid trip to the Shrine of Our Lady in Oostakker, Belgium, a recent Lourdes replica that had been constructed in 1873. This imperative was always denied by his employer, who was considered a staunch rationalist. The Viscount du Bus had already shelled out money to pay for both Pierre's treatments and pension, considering the pilgrimage to be a pointless endeavor that would only enable fanciful superstition. The Viscount would pass away on July 26th, 1874, and was replaced by a relative, who revoked Pierre's pension after restructuring the property's assets. Pierre remained without a source of income for eight and a half months, with his wife and daughter getting jobs and working to make ends meet. Pierre again requested to visit the Oostakker shrine out of desperation, an appeal that the new Viscount eventually granted in April 1875. Accompanied by his wife, the two traveled by train to the pilgrimage site. Witnesses sharing the train with the couple noted that the ends of the tibia bone protruded from the wound on his pus-filled leg, a gruesome sight that the disabled man would show off to those traveling with him. Pierre continued to hobble around the train station in crutches as his left leg hung lifelessly.

Upon his arrival at the Oostakker Basilica on April 7th of that year, Pierre reports being overcome with emotion upon witnessing the shrine. He then felt the urge to set his crutches down and kneel in reverence as he prayed to Our Lady of Lourdes for forgiveness of sins. Healing of his leg was also requested during the intercession, not only so Pierre could be relieved from the frequent pain, but also to ensure that he could return to work to provide for his wife and daughter. As the prayer concluded, Pierre was flabbergasted as he looked down to see that the bandages had fallen off the left leg. The atrophied muscle had suddenly materialized. Likewise was the swelling in his formerly pus-covered leg, which had immediately subsided. The broken leg was apparently instantly restored, with the two pieces of severed and dislocated bone rejoining and the open wound closing within a matter of minutes. The Belgian Catholic was overjoyed and was seen by various witnesses running around the shrine, tossing away his

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same year of the healing in Scheerlinck, Emile. *Het Vlaamsche Lourdes: De Vereering der Onbevlekte Maagd Maria aan de Rots van Oostakker.* (Gent: Genootschap van den H. Carolus Borromaeus), 1875. See also Harris, Ruth. *Lourdes, Body and Spirit in the Secular Age* (New York: Penguin Books), 1999 and Läpple, Alfred *Les Miracles de Lourdes*, Edizioni Piemme, 1997.

crutches as he jumped up and down in excitement. Pierre was then examined that day by the Marquise de Courtebourne, who found the leg to be healed.

The following morning on April 8th, de Rudder visited his primary physician Dr. Affenaer, the surgeon who had originally nursed the leg while Pierre was under the care of the Viscount. The physician verified that the leg was now normal without any sign of bone protruding below the knee, noting only a faded scar where the wound had once been (Figure 1). The doctor was overcome with emotion at the sight of this healing and believed it to be a miracle performed through the intercession of the Blessed Virgin. Four days later the miracle man was visited and interrogated by Johan Joseph Faict, the local Bishop of Bruges, who was intrigued by the story but declined to open up an official investigative commission until enough evidence could be gathered.

***Figure 1**: Photograph of Pierre de Rudder in the years following his sudden healing in 1875. A faded scar remains visible on the left leg from which the ends of the fractured tibia originally protruded, as well as a scar found on the upper portion of the left foot. Photo credit to A. Watteyne who published the photo on March 10th, 1912 in Bruges, Belgium.*

About a week after the healing, a certificate with 13 signatories was produced verifying that Pierre had in fact had a broken leg and was publicly seen on crutches and in great pain by those who knew him,[16]

> We, the undesigned parishioners of Jabbeke, declare that the shin bone of Pierre Jacques Rudder, native and residents of this place, aged fifty-two years, has been so fractured by the fall of a tree, on February 16th [1867], that, every resource of surgery having been exhausted, the patient was given up and declared incurable by the doctors, and considered as such by all who knew him; that he invoked Our Lady of Lourdes, venerated at Oostacker, and that he returned cured and without crutches, so that he can do any kind of work as before his accident. We declare that this sudden and admirable cure took place on April 7th, 1875.
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> -Parishioners of Jabbeke, April 15, 1975

These signatories included the clergy of his local parish and the locals of his hometown, "yesterday they had seen Pierre drag himself with difficulty to Mass on his crutches; now he was walking about like any of them."[17] Among the signers of the document was Pierre's new employer, who confirmed that the man had truly been disabled and had been receiving a pension from his previous supervisor. The following day on April 16th, de Rudder was interviewed by the Chaplain of Jabbeke, who would publish the testimonies of the parishioners in his 1876 book.[18] Additionally produced was an affidavit signed by three witnesses 10 day later who claimed they had seen Pierre's leg broken the day prior to his healing. Two of the signatories in question were father and son, Edouard and Jules van Hooren. The third witness, Marie Wittizacle, described how she changed his pus-stained bandages the day before the pilgrimage. All three were neighbors of de Rudder. The affidavit reads as follows,[19]

> The undersigned declare that they saw the broken leg of Petrus [Pierre] Jacobus De Rudder, of Jabbeke, seen on April 6, 1873, and well in such a state, that the tibia was broken in such a way that the two bones broke through the skin came and through a purulent oozing wound, about three centimeters apart from each other; we also declare that the above that De Rudder on the 7th day of this month left for his pilgrimage to [shrine] of Lourdes, venerated in Oostakker, has returned entirely healed, such that the bones run together, that the wound has completely disappeared and that now the man can walk, stand and work just as before his accident.
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> -Edouard van Hooren, Jules van Hooren, and Marie Wittizacle, April 25, 1875

There is no direct medical certificate produced by Pierre's primary surgeons; however, one will note the testimony of Dr. van Hoestenberghe, a local physician of the poor who avowed that he had examined Pierre's leg both prior to and immediately following the miracle healing. At the request of Bishop Faict, the doctor would send the local clergy two letters written on April 15th and May 12, 1875 attesting that he had indeed been present at the time the foot was uncovered.[20] We may say with great historical confidence that within a few weeks of the alleged miracle, a total of at least three written affidavits and letters attest to the testimonies of around 20 named individuals who claim to have seen Pierre with a severely fractured leg immediately prior

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[16] Produced in Bertrin, *Lourdes*, pg. 176.

[17] Quoted from *The Month: An Illustrated Magazine of Literature, Science and Art*, Volume 92 pg. 505

[18] Scheerlinck, *Het Vlaamsche Lourdes*

[19] Ibid, pg. 366-367.

[20] De Meester, A. *De Wonderbare*, pg. 35, 37.

to his pilgrimage to Oostakker. These same witnesses are unanimous in claiming to have seen de Rudder return, able to walk unaided and lacking an indication of a fracture.

Pierre became a local celebrity of sorts when he returned home. Many skeptics in the community were said to have converted upon witnessing the now-healed Pierre; the man himself would go on to continue working for the new Viscount for another 15 years before his death from pneumonia in 1898. The Oostakker shrine would gain major notoriety in correspondence to the miracle's newfound publicity, with as many as 20,000 pilgrims visiting the site a day. Accompanying such pilgrims were additional claims of miracles, such as the healing of Rosa Petiet from blindness after gazing upon a statue of Our Lady of Lourdes in Oostakker.[21] Whatever one thinks of de Rudder's healing at the Belgian Lourdes Shrine, it is incontestable that its legacy would far outlive the initial social buzz behind it.

The Investigation

Though several affidavits were produced a few weeks following the miracle, a formal inquiry was not organized until decades later when van Hoestenberghe would write to Dr. Gustave Boissiere, head of Lourdes Medical Bureau, in August 1892 when the Belgian doctor purported to the bureau that Pierre's healing was a good candidate for a certified cure on behalf of Our Lady of Lourdes. This would set in motion an investigation at the request of local physician Dr. Royer, who would assemble the relevant witnesses together to testify to their involvement with said miracle. Most of the witnesses were still alive, though nearly all the attending physicians had passed away. These spectators were interviewed to give their sworn testimony in December 1892 to attest to the fact that the leg had been certifiably broken immediately prior to the pilgrimage. A few vignettes are provided below:

- Edouard van Hooren, one of the neighbors of de Rudder who had signed an affidavit 18 days after the healing where he testified to having seen the bone clearly broken and jagged the day prior to Pierre's pilgrimage.[22]

- Jean Houtsaeghe, a barrel-maker living just outside of Pierre's hometown of Jabbkee, claimed he met Pierre and saw the leg nine days before pilgrimage (around March 30th, 1875), and noted the jagged edge of the bone tips that protruded from the wound when Pierre bent the leg back.[23]

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[21] Windey, Joseph. "TV Documentary on Miracle Cure at Shrine to Our Lady of Lourdes." *The Catholic Standard and Times,* 63 no. 32, May 2nd, 1958

[22] Bertrin, *Lourdes*, pg. 168.

[23] Paul Deschepper in 'The Spectacular Healing of Pierre de Rudder' *FIAMC,* May 30th, 2018, https://www.fiamc.org/faith-prayer/the-healing-of-pieter-de-rudder/ quotes more fully from the testimony. Houtsaeghe describes the following in a letter written on June 29th, 1899: "On Friday before the day of healing Pieter bared his leg at my request. He removed the bandage; it was terrible to see how much dirt ("saletés") came from the wound and how much stench got around. Look what I saw: his left leg was broken so much that the unfortunate easily could turn his toes backward, while his knee kept its place. When he folded his leg, he could display the two pieces of the broken bone, its color was no longer natural; they were like the bones at the graveyard."

- Jabbeke farmer Louis Knockaert asserted he saw Pierre on April 4th, 1975 (three days before the healing) and had also seen the clearly broken tibia of Pierre's leg.[24]

- A shoemaker from Jabbeke named Jean Duclos had been traveling with de Rudder and his wife on April 5th as the couple made their way to the shrine. He journeyed with them until the carriage arrived at Bruges, where they departed from each other. He noted the flexibility of Pierre's broken leg and the pus and bone that derived from it.[25]

- Pierre Blomme, a gatekeeper at the Oostakker shrine, stated that he had helped carry de Rudder to the carriage on the day of his healing, due to the severity of the injured leg. He also testified to seeing the man return from the trip walking perfectly, without crutches.[26]

One of the more interesting testimonies is that of the Viscountess de Bus, the wife of Pierre's new employer. Both the Viscountess and her husband argued that Pierre had truly been disabled, that he had previously been receiving a pension for his injury, and that his leg had been badly broken prior to his pilgrimage. Writing in 1906, about 31 years after the healing, the woman recounts Pierre having frequently come to the estate to request permission and funds to journey to the Oostakker shrine, "He [Pierre] used to come pretty frequently to the château to see the Viscount Christian du Bus de Gisignies."[27] She describes in quite grotesque detail an incident on April 5th, 1875 (two days prior to the miracle) where she had seen the decayed leg,[28]

> Moved by curiosity, I wanted to see De Rudder's leg. He took off the linen bandages, which were saturated with pus and blood. The odour was insupportable. The last folds of the bandage were stuck to the wound, and could not be easily detached. At this sight I instinctively recoiled.

Among the chief testimonies in the inquiry was that of Dr. van Hoestenberghe. The physician's original 1875 letter mentions the man stopping by the de Rudder home in late 1871 and seeing the uncovered foot of Pierre severely atrophied with bone matter protruding from an open sore. A later letter written to the Lourdes Medical Bureau on August 21st, 1892 provides an assortment of grotesque detail; van Hoestenberghe described the broken leg as having "an open wound at the top of the leg" on which one could see "the two bones separated by a distance of three centimeters" and the "fragments were so numerous that, in shaking the limbs, the bones could be heard rattling." The doctor continues to describe the graphic state of the leg at the time:[29]

> …[the] lower part of the leg, with the foot, literally swung at the end of the limb, so that I could actually twist the heel round, more than once...the heel could be lifted so as to practically fold the leg in half...all of these movements were only limited by the resistance of the muscular tissues.

In his judgment such a recovery would not be possible in such a short period of time, "Considering the condition in which the leg was when I saw it, I affirm that it could not possibly, under any conditions whatever, have completely healed in the time between my visit and the

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[24] Bertin, *Lourde*s, pg. 168.
[25] *The Month*, pg. 504.
[26] Bertrin, *Lourdes*, pg. 170-171.
[27] Ibid pg. 168-169.
[28] Ibid, pg. 169.
[29] Bertrin, *Lourdes*, pg. 167, 183-184.

pilgrimage."[30] The doctor claims that, as an unbeliever, he was initially dismissive upon hearing of the miracle, but was convicted after examining the healed leg of Pierre in the days following the healing. He would double down on this claim a final time in 1907, testifying under oath that he had examined the leg a dozen or so times, the most recent of which occurred a mere four months prior to the miracle in January 1875.[31] The amalgamation of these testimonies was enough to certify the miracle as genuine by the local bishops. Although Pierre de Rudder would pass away in 1898, his legacy would certainly live on following the posthumous certification of his miracle on July 25th, 1908, deeming him as the 8th official miracle of Lourdes.

The Critics

Following the medical inquiries held at Lourdes in 1907 and 1908, Pierre's healing quickly gained notoriety and was published in various medical journals of the day, most notably early 20th-century editions of *La Chronique Medicale* and the *Journal de la Grotte.*[32] Likewise was the June 1910 edition of the acclaimed *British Medical Journal,* which was among the first to indicate reservation in accepting the cure as truly miraculous.[33] A large amount of skeptical reception soon arose between laymen and doctors alike.[34] The normal critiques of Lourdes's miracles would not hold much weight here; such an immediate cure of a clearly fractured leg would no doubt be difficult to explain naturally, not being able to be accounted for through misdiagnosis or hysteria, and thus many in the area considered this definitive evidence of Our Lady's intervention.

Critics were quite diverse in their judgments, with some arguing that the leg had never truly been broken and that Pierre had been hysteric. Others stated that the testimonies were contradictory and could not initially even agree on which of the two legs had been broken to begin with. Many argued that the case was ripe with fake X-rays, coerced testimonies, and credulous witnesses.[35] One objector even argued Pierre received a secret operation to repair his leg a few weeks before the miracle. Even if this was a genuine miracle, it was clear to everyone that there was room for doubt, "It was becoming increasingly clear that the shrine's perfect cure was no longer beyond dispute. Indeed, the growing number of accusations of fraud and ineptitude raised anew suspicions about the authenticity of the cure."[36] Apologists of Lourdes had their own cards to play, retorting that the critics resorted to *ad hominem* attacks and their inconsistency in postulating a natural explanation proved they could not debase the miracle claim through medical evidence,[37]

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[30] Ibid pg. 167
[31] De Meester, A. *De Wonderbare*, pg. 246.
[32] Kaufman, Suzanne. *Consuming Visions: Mass Culture and the Lourdes Shrine.* Cornell University Press, pg. 186.
[33] Butlin, H. T. "Remarks on Spiritual Healing." *British Medical Journal* 1, no. 2581 (1910): 1466-1470.
[34] Kaufman, *Consuming Visions,* pg. 186.
[35] Ibid, pg. 186
[36] Ibid, pg. 186
[37] Ibid, pg. 186.

> ...the proliferating attacks against the de Rudder cure also began to hurt the anticlerical physicians who launched them, for they revealed the inability of medical experts to provide a unified or coherent counterinterpretation of the event. The reality that doctors so quickly resorted to personal diatribe and outright mockery only emphasized their own sense of fear and frustration that the case could not be won on the firm terrain of scientific facts.

Such hostility between apologists and polemicists became even more apparent in 1910 when a medical conference was hosted by the Medical Society of Milan; the topic of de Rudder's healing was the subject of many debates among physicians attending the event. Both sides seemed to fail at convincing the other. Local papers reporting on the conference noted that the rationalists seemed to be much more fervent and passionate in their disdain for the miracle claim, referring to the skeptics as "unthinking dogmatists",[38] while observing that the defenders of de Rudder were generally more collected and analytical in their responses. In 1911, a public wager for 10,000 francs was made between cleric Abbe Ebrard and Philosopher P. Chide to decide which side would come out on top.[39] Would the apologists be able to prove that Pierre's healing defied medical explanation? Or would the skeptics find enough holes in the story to shoot down the parachute of apologetics that supporters of Lourdes put forth? Unsurprisingly, neither side ended up collecting the money, largely because no proper criteria could be decided for proving, or disproving, the miraculous nature of the cure.

Possibly the most well-known natural alternative to Pierre's miracle was put forward by the journalist F. Verhas, whose 1911 expose accused the man of faking his injury in order to receive his disability payments from the Viscount du Bus. The most famous healing of Lourdes, in the eyes of the cynic, was likely an elaborate hoax propounded by insurance and disability fraud.[40] Modern skeptics like Joe Nickell, writing in 2010, have given similar theories to that of Verhas, though he argues that the leg truly was broken initially. This healing was gradual and natural, with only the dishonesty of Pierre and the gullibility of the townspeople creating the illusion of a miracle.[41] Nickell's work is itself based on the writings of 20th-century skeptic Adrien Delcour, whose work is probably the most thorough modern critique of the de Rudder miracle.[42] Delcour's formulation of the de Rudder remains the most definitive, and so will be given the most attention in the rest of this paper.

An Alternative Explanation

Adrien Delcour counters the traditional Lourdes narrative by depicting Pierre de Rudder not as a devout Catholic in search of a miracle, but as a charlatan attempting to exploit his employer for money. The skeptic concedes that Pierre truly did fracture his leg in 1867 and that he was cared for by medics for several months while receiving a disability payment from his employer. The story changes from here: Delcour suggests that the leg may have gradually healed sometime later, a fact that Pierre hid from the public to continue to receive money from his worker's compensation. Once the pension ended, Pierre realized that he would no longer be able to malinger. The Belgian man planned on staging his miracle recovery as an excuse to return to work and perhaps gain fame throughout his community. Is it not rather convenient that Pierre

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[38] Ibid, pg. 187

[39] Ibid, pg. 189-191.

[40] Ibid, pg. 188

[41] Nickell, "Belgian Miracles".

[42] Delcour, Adrien. *Un Grand Miracle De Lourdes La Guérison De Pierre De Rudder Que Vaut Le Témoignage.* 1987 and Idem, *Le Miracle De Rudder: Réponse au Dr Deschepper* (Bruxelles: Mai) 2023.

was not "healed" until after his pension was revoked in 1874, and only then did the man visit the healing shrine? Delcour further argues that Pierre was able to deceive the physicians employed by the Viscount by using trickery during medical inspections. Pierre had on many occasions bandages dressed around the leg, and Delcour speculates that Pierre may have been flexible enough to pull off a contortionist act, able to twist his leg around during these examinations in order to fool the doctors into thinking the leg was still broken,[43]

> At the cost of a slight sway, some fairly flexible people (the author of these lines, for example) easily manage to turn their foot over, their toes 'almost' backwards, rotating the ankle. This exercise must have been all the easier for De Rudder as he had lost the extensor tendon of the great toe.

What of the testimony of the many witnesses who saw the bones separated shortly prior to the miracle? Here there is a tapestry of explanations sewn together by Delcour to form an elaborate counter-explanation. He suggests that the three witnesses who signed the affidavit a week after the healing were credulous and unreliable.[44] Two were relatives and cannot be considered independent. The third was the testimony of the illiterate Marie Wittizacle, which should not be considered since the woman was not present to sign the affidavit. Her testimony was recounted only through the other two witnesses and is thus hearsay.[45] The 13 locals who signed the certificate only days subsequent to the miracle did not attest having seen the broken bone of the leg, and so could have been deceived by Pierre's malingering as he continued to feign injury. Delcour goes on to argue that the rest of the testimonies come from 1892 or later as the Inquiry took place, almost 20 years subsequent, opening up the possibility of faulty memory to distort the details.[46] This is not implausible. In many cases, such mis recollection can be demonstrated with many of these later witnesses.[47] Though none of this disqualifies the main details for the healing in question, the discrepancy of the later testimonies demonstrates that one should be hesitant to accept any testimony from 1892 onward as credible.

Perhaps the most important testimony, that of Dr. van Hoestenberghe, is also the most problematic. Of the various written and sworn statements made by the doctor over the course of 30 years, one will notice several major contradictions pertaining to the number of times the leg was examined prior to the miracle, as well as discrepancies about the dates of the last examination prior to and following the healing:

- *Source 1, Letter by van Hoestenberghe to Bishop Faict dated April 15th, 1875*: Mentions that the physician had examined the leg of Pierre multiple times prior to

[43] Delcour, *Un Grand Miracle*, pg. 5.
[44] Ibid, pg. 6.
[45] Nickell, "Belgian Miracles", pg. 13
[46] Ibid, pg. 4.
[47] Delcour in *Un Grand Miracle* gives several examples. At least some of the discrepant details given by Dr. van Hoestenberghe imply that he had misremembered details (such as the dates of examination, the number of times he inspected the leg, etc). Another incident involves the Viscountess, who argued decades later that her husband had never revoked Pierre's pension in 1874, though multiple earlier written testimonies confirm that the pension had in fact been discontinued. Either the woman misremembered the details, or she was lying to not be blamed for the de Rudder families' plummet into poverty following the payment's cancellation. Finally, Pierre's daughter contradicted herself in 1907 when she claimed that her father's open wound (though not the bone) had healed naturally prior to the miracle despite many earlier witnesses claiming the wound was visible just days prior to the healing.

the pilgrimage, but had not yet examined the leg following its healing on April 7th.

- *Source 2, Letter by van Hoestenberghe to Bishop Faict dated to May 12th, 1875*: States that the doctor had examined the leg only on a single occasion in the last months of 1871, around three years prior to the miracle, and noted that at the time of that examination the leg showed no signs of healing.

- *Source 3, Medical notes transcribed in van Hoestenberghe's notebook dated to 1875*: Mentions that Pierre was examined around four times in the final months of 1874 and was being cared for by Dr. Verriest. Declares to have examined the healed leg four days following the pilgrimage on April 9th of the same year.

- *Source 4, Two letters by van Hoestenberghe to Dr. Gustave Boissarie on August 21st, 1892:* Claims that he had examined the leg of Pierre on around a dozen of occasions while it was still injured, declaring that he has since studied the healed leg and believes it to have been miraculously healed.

- *Source 5, Sworn testimony by van Hoestenberghe before the tribunal on December 11th, 1907*: Swore that he had examined the leg well over ten times prior to the miracle, finding it to be in a hopeless state. The most recent of these examinations was around January 1875, approximately four months prior to the pilgrimage.

Both of the 1875 letters written by van Hoestenberghe to the bishop were lost until 1956 and were thus not utilized in the original 1907 inquiry. One of the earliest writings (Source 2) states that Pierre de Rudder was seen by the doctor on only one occasion three years prior to the miracle, despite van Hoestenberghe recounting 18 years later that he had in fact examined the leg many times in the months leading up to the healing (Sources 4 and 5). This acts as evidence that the doctor's memory was failing him and that his story appeared to become exaggerated over time. Delcour admits that other early sources, such as the comments transcribed in the doctor's notebook in 1875 (Source 3), agree with the later testimony confirming multiple examinations between December 1874 and January 1875. However, these notes are in contradiction to other writings from the same time period. The medical notes mention van Hoestenberghe examining the leg immediately after the miracle on April 9th, 1875, despite the doctor writing on April 15th that no post-healing examination had yet taken place. It is for this reason that Delcour suspects that the comments found in the notebook may actually be from a later date and not from 1875.[48] Whatever the explanation, the various discrepancies will give one pause before assigning much weight to by van Hoestenberghe's testimony.

Much of the debate revolving around this case comes down to how trustworthy one finds all of these witnesses to be. Memories recounted over a decade later are often demonstrably subject to error, especially in an environment of religious fervor where the alleged details of the miracle were already well known. Hope of a miracle could easily cloud the judgement of the religiously

[48] Delcour, *Un Grand Miracle,* pg. *3*. We further see Delcour on page 9 of *Le Miracle de Rudder* quote from van Hoestenberghe's May 12th, 1875 letter to show a contradiction with the doctor's prior statements, "I was called to care for his child, towards the end of 71. It was then that for the first time I saw this leg and I did not see it again until it healed."

devout.[49] Social contagion is a factor that we must control; it is quite easy to imagine how one witness can turn into many as gossip spreads throughout the region, each person excitedly propounding that they too were witnesses to a miracle that the community desperately wants to believe. For the critics of Lourdes, de Rudder's recovery was not an achievement on behalf of the Virgin Mary but rather "a miracle that wasn't."[50]

Lourdes's Apologists Retaliate

Apologists for the healing power of Lourdes pushed back on these naturalistic alternatives, spurring for many decades from pillar to post between the skeptic and the apologist. When Verhas initially popularized his naturalistic alternative to the miracle of Oostakker, apologists such as Alfred Descamps responded in his 1913 book *Le Cas de Pierre de Rudder*.[51] Updated defenses of the miracle were published in the 1950s when Dr. van Hoestenberghe's lost letters were found, published by Canon De Meester, one of the miracle's initial promoters.[52] Adrien Delcour then responded to De Meester's defense in 1987, giving perhaps the best modern critique of the miracle[53]. Skeptical investigator Joe Nickell produced a briefer and more popular-level rendition of Delcour's arguments around 23 years later.[54] Most recent, and as far as I know the only in-depth response to Delcour, is Sam Calvin's online article in defense of the authenticity of de Rudder's miracle in rebuttal to Nickell.[55]

It should be said that, even in criticism, one should commend Delcour in some of his condemnatory appraisals. One can agree that much of the later testimony is less credible and that the complications and technicalities surrounding the testimony of Dr. van Hoestenberghe are too murky to be of use to either side of the debate. However, apologists still argue that holes can be found in some of the arguments Delcour puts forward. Chiefly, Delcour rightly spends a large amount of his work critiquing the later testimonies but has little to say against the earliest and best attested witnesses. His only critique of the testimonies of the van Hooren family (who signed the affidavit only a few weeks following the miracle) is that they are not independent witnesses given their familial relations, a critique noted but nonetheless irrelevant to the reliability of such testimony. Delcour does not provide evidence to decry van Hooren as unreliable or credulous, only suggesting that his story grew over time. Even if this were true, it does not follow that details unreliably remembered later deem the earlier written testimony to be questionable. A further analysis implies Delcour's judgment on van Hooren's testimony to be quite waning; in reviewing both van Hooren's written testimony in 1875 and his later sworn

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[49] For evidence that religiosity can often reduce the credibility of eyewitness testimony, especially as it pertains to miracle claimants, consult Slade, Darren M. "Miracle Eyewitness Reports." In *Encyclopedia of Psychology and Religion*, pp. 1485-1489. Springer International Publishing, 2020; and Lobato, Emilio JC, Shadab Tabatabaeian, Morgan Fleming, Sven Sulzmann, and Colin Holbrook. "Religiosity Predicts Evidentiary Standards." *Social Psychological and Personality Science* 11, no. 4 (2020): 546-551.

[50] Nickell, "Belgian Miracles", pg. 13.

[51] Deschamps, Alfred. *Le Cas de Pierre de Rudder et les Objections des Médecins*. Librairie de l'Action Catholique, 1913.

[52] De Meester, *De Wonderbare Genezing.*

[53] Delcour, *Un Grand Miracle.*

[54] Nickell, "Belgian Miracles".

[55] Calvin, Sam. “Beyond the New Testament: Assessing Miracle Claims.” *Academia*, n.d., pg. 6-13.

testimony in 1892, no such discrepancies are evident. Both reports consistently note the witness seeing the broken ends of the bone sticking out of Pierre's leg the day prior to his healing.[56] Thus, overall Delcour's skepticism towards the van Hooren family comes off as derived from convenience rather than being backed by solid argument or evidence. Here we find little justification for the skeptic's dismissal of this chief witness.

More *ad hoc* is Delcour's suggestion that Pierre may have been able to fool the doctors who examined his leg between 1867 and 1875 by pulling off a contortion act. It is of course theoretically possible that de Rudder could have been double-jointed, but one will find this suggestion to be extremely speculative at best and disconcertingly contrived at worst. Though the leg was often covered in bandages during these examinations (which would be required to properly cast the leg), some witnesses mention that it was on occasion exposed and naked, which would make such deception clear to see.[57] The demonstrations in question, involving the rotation of the heel 180 degrees (so that the heel was now facing forward) and the upward raising of the heel to the point where the leg was "nearly folded in half", are quite elaborate. I am unsure exactly how common such abilities are,[58] but they are typically preserved for exceptionally nimble individuals. Some physicians have pushed back on Delcour's theory and note that such movement would not be possible had Pierre, as our sources mention, put pressure on the left side of his hip in order to prevent the hip joint from properly rotating.[59]This would put the pressure on his upper and lower leg, a more difficult task had the leg not been fractured. It should also be pointed out that hypermobility and double-jointedness decrease greatly with age and are more common in women.[60] Let us not forget that Pierre was in his mid-forties at the time of his accident, performing this twisting move well into his fifties. Does this not lower the probability

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[56] Delcour states on pg. 6 of *Un Grand Miracle* that, "...in 1893 and later, the van Hoorens would add that, on the day in question, De Rudder, to please them, offered to show them his leg, discovered, bent it so that the ends of the fragments were visible and twisted it 180 degrees...Vicar Rommelaere is truly unforgivable for not having noted anything of this valuable information in 1875." Delcour's reading of van Hooren's testimony is, if I may, sloppy. Where in the initial sources were these details left out? The affidavit from 1875 indeed mentions the witnesses seeing "two parts of the broken bone pierced the flesh, and were separated by a suppurating wound an inch long." (Bertrin, *Lourdes*, pg. 169) This is not inconsistent with their testimony from 1893 where van Hooren says that he saw the broken ends of the bone protruding when Pierre twisted the leg (Bertrin, *Lourdes*, pg. 170). The only difference is that in 1893 van Hooren mentioned that this occurred when Pierre showed off his leg by twisting it. Where is the alleged contradiction or sign of development? I see nothing "truly unforgivable" here except for Delcour overstating his case.

[57] A point which Delcour concedes in *Un Grand Miracle*, pg. 5, "several witnesses will say it was [uncovered]", with Delcour then citing other witnesses who seem to contradict this testimony and claim that it was nearly always covered.

[58] General double-jointedness (hypermobility) is found in 10-25% of adults, though there is variance as to what abilities are entailed by this vary. See Gullo, Terese R., Yvonne M. Golightly, Portia Flowers, Joanne M. Jordan, Jordan B. Renner, Todd A. Schwartz, Virginia B. Kraus, Marian T. Hannan, Rebecca J. Cleveland, and Amanda E. Nelson. "Joint Hypermobility is Not Positively Associated with Prevalent Multiple Joint Osteoarthritis: A Cross-Sectional Study of Older Adults." *Musculoskeletal Disorders* 20 (2019): 1-9.

[59] As noted by Paul Deschepper in 'The Healing of Pierre de Rudder', who is himself a medical doctor. Deschepper goes on to argue the following, "Adrien Delcour claims that a slight dislocation of a hip permits turning backward the big toe, without effort. That is possible if the person like the author himself is loose-jointed. Probably he did not read that Pieter [sic] De Rudder, himself, regularly mentioned that during his demonstration he fixed his left hip joint with his left hand such that the hip joint was not moving. Pierre De Rudder demonstrated in this way also his knee uncovered. Delcour denies this."

[60] Gullo in "Joint Hypermobility", pg. 2 makes this point quite clear, "Joint hypermobility...is associated with female sex and young age, with the degree of joint range of motion decreasing as an individual ages."

that a middle-aged man would be able to perform such elaborate feats of contortion? Are we also to assume that during these demonstrations, the physicians handling the secretly healed leg were oblivious to the muscles of the appendage remaining intact, rather than being severely atrophied?[61]

Finally, the biggest criticism of Delcour's theory would be the motivation and planning on the part of the scheming Pierre de Rudder. Believers harped back against Delcour that there was little evidence that Pierre's motivations were monetarily centered. [62] The Viscountess would claim that at one point she had offered Pierre and his family a hefty price to sell their house so that she could build a grotto on the land, which the man politely refused. Of additional note is that Pierre readily returned to work for the Viscount following his healing; indeed, there is little indication that Pierre gained extensive profit from the ruse as he did not seem to use his status as "Lourdes's Eighth Miracle" for financial gain.[63] By all accounts, Pierre's intentions were not of a lazy worker who desired free money, but were of an honest and sincere man looking for a miracle.

Though he did receive a pension for disability, Pierre had continually asked his employer to allow him to travel to Oostakker to be healed even while receiving such payments; the Viscount refused to pay the travel expenses due to his disbelief in the miraculous and his desire to not be embarrassed by having his servant publicly admit such fervent superstition. If Pierre's intention to visit the shrine was to stage a miracle for financial gain, why would he do so while he was still receiving disability payments? Even when the payments ceased on July 26th, 1874 upon the death of the Viscount, Pierre continued to claim that he was disabled for another eight months prior to his healing, despite receiving no money. Pierre could not have known if his continually denied requests for pilgrimage would ever be granted; what would such an outcome look like had he never been able to visit the shrine? Would the Belgian man continued to fake his injury in light of no longer pocketing compensation? Such a plan would have built into it a range of risks. Is it not plausible that the Viscount, prior to agreeing to pay for the expenses for the trip, would have requested to see the naked leg to ensure that Pierre remained injured? According to the Viscount's wife, this is exactly what occurred.[64] Alternatively, Pierre would be taking a serious gamble if such a request was demanded, as being exposed as a malingerer could have landed him in prison for his eight years of financial defraudation. This is a point that Delcour overlooks.

A plethora of other conceivable and frankly more practical plans could have been devised by Pierre that would have involved fewer indeterminacies. Pierre could have claimed a miracle without visiting the Oostakker shrine; given his public appearances during mass, one could imagine Pierre suddenly demonstrating his ability to walk during the church service in front of many witnesses, perhaps after saying a prayer to Our Lady. This seems far more feasible and less risky than the shrine healing that became actualized and would not have required the

[61] Though Delcour does not address this point, an argument can be made that had Pierre's leg been recovering at that point, one would notice a definitive return of his muscles that had been previously atrophied. Indeed, at the moment of Pierre's healing at the shrine his bandages allegedly fell off due to the sudden formation of muscle, the presence of which was noticed by doctors and other witnesses who examined the leg the following day. A natural recovery of muscle would require extensive physical therapy prior to the pilgrimage and could not have failed to bring about noticeable definition. Is it likely that Pierre could have hidden this recovery from the doctor's handling his leg?
[62] A point extensively argued in Calvin, "Assessing Evidence", in response to Nickell's and Delcour's hypothesis.
[63] Ibid
[64] Bertrin, *Lourdes*, pg. 169

intermediary period where Pierre was without a pension for eight months. Far less contingencies would be involved.

Additionally, Pierre had to live off the income provided by his wife and daughter, both of whom worked once the pension was suspended. Delcour argues that we should be critical of the testimony of Pierre's immediate family, who would be "too interested" in going along with such fraud.[65] One wonders what motive these family members would have for going along with this scam; it cannot reasonably be argued that they had also been deceived by Pierre, for they claimed to have changed the pus-soaked bandages of the injured leg daily and noted the large wound and the liquids that oozed from it. One would need to argue that they also joined Pierre in this lie not only initially but also following the revoking of the disability payments, despite getting jobs to support him financially even after his pension was revoked. This is implausible. What would they have to gain from continuing to go along with Pierre's ruse once there was no longer any monetary motive, and why would they put up with his lie by financially supporting his actions in light of knowing that he was now able to work?

The man's employers, the Viscount du Bus and his wife the Viscountess, also defended Pierre, with the former signing a certificate a few days after the healing and the latter claiming that she had seen the wounded, pus-filled leg two days before the healing on April 5th, 1875. Granted, given that this testimony was recorded later it is possible that the Viscountess is recollecting details that never occurred. At the same time, neither seemed to have ever suspected Pierre of defrauding them, despite the Viscount being a self-described skeptic who disbelieved in the miraculous. One may argue that the couple would have motive to expose Pierre had they suspected exploitation of his disability, for their family had been paying the man’s pension until they took over the property. The estate could have sued or imprisoned the employee for falsely receiving payments despite being healed, had they truly suspected deception. None of this is a knockdown argument for the apologist, but the fact that Pierre's employers safeguarded the legitimacy of his disability must say something as to the nature of the injury. Certainly, had the Viscount accused Pierre of faking his injury rather than affirm a miracle, this would have acted as some ammunition for the skeptic. The bullets, however, seem to be loaded in the apologist's gun.

[65] Delcour, *Great Miracle*, pg. 3, "We could neglect as too interested the testimonies of the widow and the daughter of From Rudder."

Exhuming a Final Piece of Evidence

Despite decades-long debates between Pierre's defenders and detractors, little progress was found on either side. The debate only became more enflamed when the physical evidence from Pierre's skeleton was exhumed and examined in 1899. The exhumed left and right upper legs (Figure 2) underwent medical review, including a number of X-rays to verify the extent of union within the bone (Figure 3). The doctors who examined the legs came to different results. The lack of consensus led to a division within the physicians appointed to investigate the healing: two of the physicians declared the recovery unnatural and inexplicable, whereas the other two did not find the healing of bone compelling enough to be deemed miraculous. The debate continued

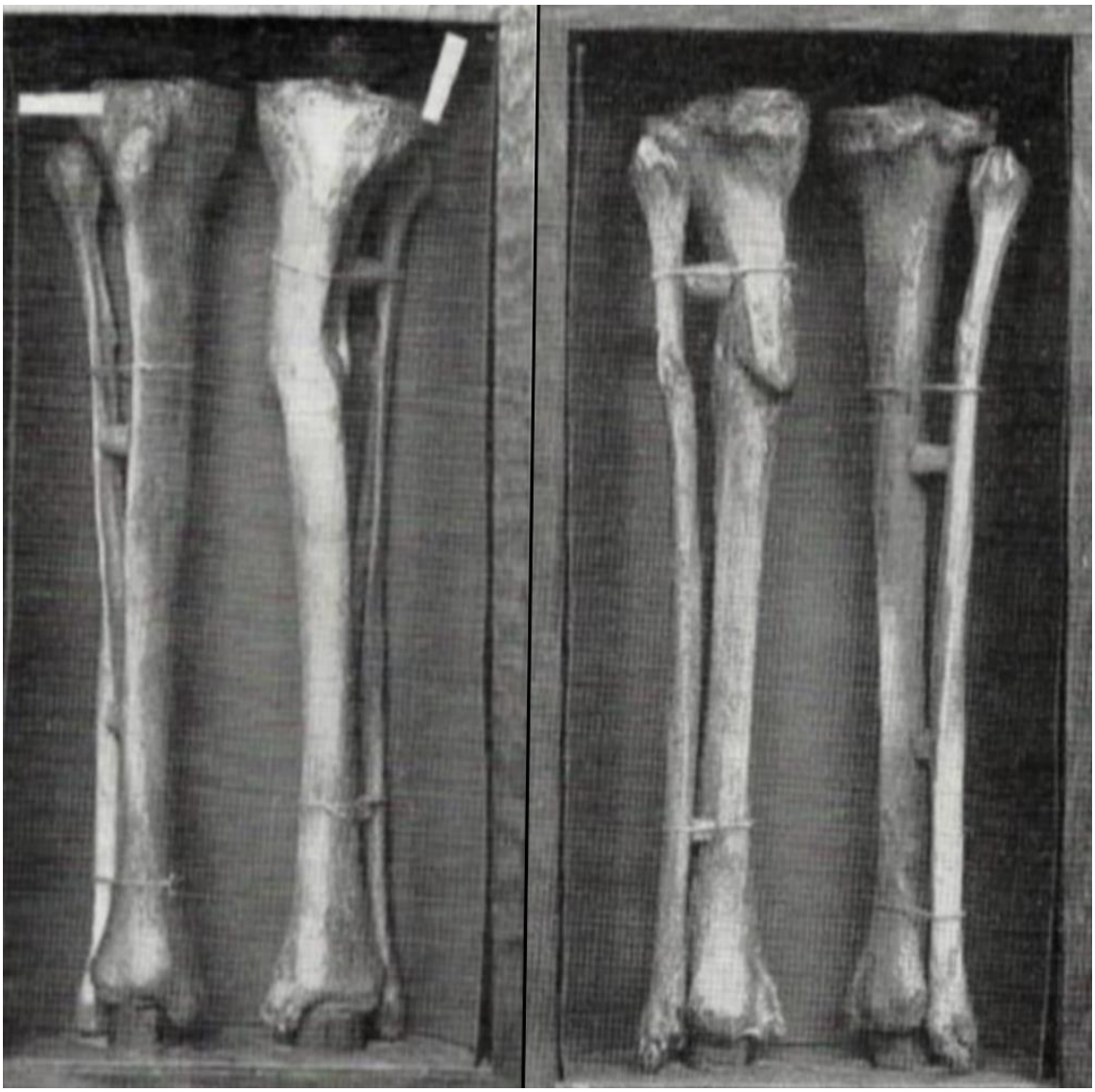

***Figure 2**:Pierre de Rudder's legs exhumed from their burial place, with both a front view (left) and a rear view (right) demonstrating the malunion of the left tibia and fibula. They remain on display at the Lourdes Medical Museum. Original photos courtesy of De Meester, "De Wonderbare"*

several decades later, with arguments from both sides presented in European medical journals of the early 20th century.[66]

***Figure 3**: Post-exhumation radiograph of Pierre's left tibia and fibula, showing full union of the bone. Derived from the archives of the Basilica of Our Lady of Lourdes in Oostakker.*

Critics noted that the left tibia clearly displayed an old fracture and scar, implying a wound that had healed with age. The bone also formed a definite malunion that left the leg crooked, consistent with unstinted bone healing incorrectly. If such a healing was the handiwork of Our Lady of Lourdes, then Mary left a lot to be desired. In the year 1950, another medical examination argued that a callus on the tibia could be observed, indicating a perfectly normal and unextraordinary healing, labeling it quite banal and natural.[67] Others found similar issues,[68]

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[66] Szabo, Jason. "Seeing is Believing? The Form and Substance of French Medical Debates over Lourdes." *Bulletin of the History of Medicine* (2002): 199-230.
[67] Van Osselaer, Tine, Henk De Smaele, and Kaat Wils, eds. *Sign or Symptom?: Exceptional Corporeal Phenomena in Religion and Medicine in the 19th and 20th Centuries*. Vol. 19. Leuven University Press, 2017. The authors object to Elaut's judgement and argue that the leg had not in fact healed over the eight-year period.
[68] Nickell "Belgian Miracles", pg. 13.

> the bones grew together obliquely in a fashion a surgeon would not have been proud of…that which would have indeed been beyond nature—the reconstitution of De Rudder's dead tendon—did not occur…there is evidence that an injury, healed long before, was passed off as instantaneous.

On the more conservative end, anatomical arguments were given to disbound natural alternatives. While some argued that the bone contained an intermediary callus that would be expected from a natural recovery, others disputed this.[69] The tibias were of the same length, which is surprising if such healing occurred naturally (typically bone that heals untreated results in a shorter limb). The initial surgical proceedings conducted by Dr. Affenaer at the time of the accident described the ends of the bones as curved, which almost certainly would have resulted in a severe limp or immobility had they mended naturally in such a position.[70] Yet from the day of his healing up until his death, Pierre had no need for a cane, crutches, casts, or stints, being able to walk normally without a limp.

Other anatomical features may also prohibit the plausibility of natural healing. While the bones undeniably formed a malunion, it was a complete union nonetheless. A natural mending of bone should not have occurred if, as our sources say, the bone remained largely unrepaired even several years after the initial injury. The timeframe for a bone to heal will vary depending on the type of bone, the health and age of the individual, and the extent of the fracture, though on average a normal union will take anywhere from a few weeks to a few months.[71] Under some circumstances a delayed union can occur when the body does not begin to heal the bone until several months following the injury. If bone has not begun to repair past this point, it is diagnosed as a non-union and will in all probability not heal naturally.[72] The United States Federal Drug Administration classifies a non-union as any fracture that has remained unhealed after nine months and has shown no signs of healing for at least the first three months following the injury.[73] Non-unions in tibial fractures are relatively common and occur in around 15-19% of patients.[74] An open tibial fracture, the kind of injury sustained by Pierre de Rudder, will on average take 37 weeks to heal completely.[75]

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[69] As argued by Dr. Royer, one of the physicians who published an inquiry into the miracle in 1894, "since April 7th, 1875, no fibrous callus had existed, and a callus should still at this date, and long afterwards, have united and bound together the broken ends, in the case of a fracture with sores and separation of the bones. But the contrary has happened, for the bones had been joined together without this intermediary." Cited in Bertrin, *Lourdes,* pg. 182. Nickell in 'Belgian Miracles' disputes this assessment, citing the Encyclopedia Britannica that such callus could be reabsorbed back into the body. There are other examples of delayed unions forming without leaving behind an intermediate callus. More recent judgment in favor of the presence of callus should be favored over more dated interpretations of the 19th century.

[70] An argument put forward by Calvin in "Assessing Evidence".

[71] Bigham-Sadegh, Amin, and Ahmad Oryan. "Basic Concepts Regarding Fracture Healing and the Current Options and Future Directions in Managing Bone Fractures." *International Wound Journal* 12, no. 3 (2015): 238-247.

[72] Marsh, David. "Concepts of Fracture Union, Delayed Union, and Nonunion." *Clinical Orthopaedics and Related Research* 355 (1998): 22-30.

[73] Thomas, Joshua D., and James L. Kehoe. "Bone Nonunion." *StatPearls*, 2023.

[74] Mundi, Raman, Daniel Axelrod, Diane Heels-Ansdell, Harman Chaudhry, Olufemi R. Ayeni, Brad Petrisor, Jason W. Busse, Lehana Thabane, and Mohit Bhandari. "Nonunion in Patients with Tibial Shaft Fractures: Is Early Physical Status Associated with Fracture Healing?." *Cureus* 12, no. 4 (2020).

[75] Stewart, S. K. "Fracture Non-union: A Review of Clinical Challenges and Future Research Needs." *Malaysian Orthopaedic Journal* 13, no. 2 (2019): 1-10.

If, then, Pierre's surgeons were correct that the leg remained over a year following his accident, this would decrease the likelihood of the leg healing naturally. The possibility of a delayed union could still be raised, but this would be difficult to propose if the testimony of Dr. van Hoestenberghe and the other witnesses about the leg remaining severely fractured is anything to go by. Our most generous assessment brings us to at least five witnesses with contemporary testimony (van Hoestenberghe, the two van Hooren neighbors, and the two de Rudder relatives) who claim that the leg remained visibly fractured several years following the accident, far too late for any precedent for a natural healing to be posited. While it has already been shown that the exact dates of van Hoestenberghe's medical examinations of the leg are contentious, the likelihood of a non-union remains high even if we are to grant 1871 (a full four years after the accident) as the only viable year when the doctor observed the leg in full fracture. This would still be far longer than the nine months needed to establish a fracture as being non-union. Thus, we have strong evidence not of a merely delayed union, but of a non-union with a prognosis of permanent injury. This significantly reduces the likelihood of Pierre de Rudder undergoing a gradual recovery through nothing more than the inner workings of the musculoskeletal system.[76]

To conclude the findings of the exhumation, both data points leave us with unanswered questions. The uneven healing of the bone is difficult to explain had the Virgin Mary truly healed Pierre supernaturally, but the man's ability to walk normally despite such malformation indicates a functional healing.[77] Equally perplexing is the fact that the fracture was able to heal completely, despite various testimonies pointing to the diagnosis of a permanent non-union that should have precluded a natural recovery. Either way, we are left with more questions than answers.

Conclusion

Pierre de Rudder’s healing is among the most impressive claims of healing Lourdes has in its catalog. The event's legacy of controversy within the medical community of its day is arguably of greater notoriety than the cure itself and therefore makes it one of the most widely discussed miracle claims of modern history. The back-and-forth between skeptics and believers met no clear resolution, with a stalemate being the end result. Religious adherents who accept the possibility of miracles will likely continue to tout the healing of Pierre de Rudder as *bona fide* evidence of the mercy and power of The Virgin of Lourdes. Skeptics will likely remain unmoved. The dissenter of Lourdes may, rightly or wrongly, punt to the famous maxim of David

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[76] As pointed out by Lack, William D., James S. Starman, Rachel Seymour, Michael Bosse, Madhav Karunakar, Stephen Sims, and James Kellam. "Any Cortical Bridging Predicts Healing of Tibial Shaft Fractures." *Journal of Bone and Joint Surgery* 96, no. 13 (2014): 1066-1072., observation of cortical bridging (or the lack thereof) of a tibial fracture within four months postoperatively has a predictive rate of 99% in determining whether the fracture will be able to complete union. This is admittedly in reference to radiographic assessments of the fracture that would have not been available in the 19th-century, though the visual obviousness of the two ends of Pierre's bone protruding from an open wound would make radiography redundant.

[77] Catholics who affirm the miracle may argue that perhaps the Virgin intentionally left the faint scars and malformation on the leg as evidence that it had at one point been broken. The earliest critics disputed Pierre's initial accident in 1867, with many arguing the leg had never been broken. The exhumed tibia and fibula were enough to at least dispel this theory, as it was indisputable that the leg had at one point been significantly fractured.
This kind of detail is quite common in cases of Lourdes's healings, where a patient becomes functional and asymptomatic despite continuing to have scars or internal signs of the disease. These side effects are sometimes nicknamed "souvenirs" left over to pilgrims by the Virgin of Lourdes, according to Glynn, *Healing Fire of Christ*, pg. 73.

Hume espoused, "No testimony is sufficient to establish a miracle, unless the testimony be of such a kind, that its falsehood would be more miraculous, than the fact, which it endeavors to establish."[78] What, then, is more likely? Is it more probable that the laws of nature were momentarily suspended by the Blessed Virgin on April 7th, 1875 to heal a Belgian Catholic of a broken leg? Or should we suppose that one could find the same quality of testimony from several witnesses, accompanied by exhumed bones of the injury in question, for a miracle that never occurred? If Hume is right, we must reject whichever is the greater miracle.

Nevertheless, the dichotomy between miracle and hoax is a false one. One may accept that such a fantastic healing did occur, yet remain agnostic to the cause. This was the attitude of the Princeton scholar B.B. Warfield,[79]

> That of Pierre de Rudder may be said, in fact, to be Lourdes's star case, and is found duly set forth in detail at the head of…every argument for the miraculousness of the Lourdes cures… We have never seen a satisfactory natural explanation of how this cure was effected…We prefer simply to leave it, meanwhile, unexplained. Do you cry out that we are bound to supply a satisfactory natural explanation of it, or else acknowledge that a miracle has taken place in this case? We feel no difficulty in declining the dilemma. The healing of Pierre de Rudder's leg is not the only thing that has occurred in the world of the mode of the occurrence of which we are ignorant... We are only beginning to learn the marvellous behavior of which living tissue is capable, and it may well be that, after a while, it may seem very natural that Pierre de Rudder's case happened just as it is said to have happened. We are afraid to alter the facts as witnessed even a little, in order to make them fit in better with the ignorance of today: and our guesses of today are sure to seem very foolish tomorrow. We do not busy ourselves, therefore, with conjecturing how Pierre de Rudder's cure may have happened. We are willing to believe that it happened just as it is said to have happened. We are content to know that, in no case, was it a miracle.

Whether one accepts, dissents, or withholds judgment of the case must be decided on the epistemic convictions of each individual. We may never know exactly what happened in Oostakker that pivotal April evening, but whatever the explanation, the legacy of Pierre de Rudder will likely continue to spark discussion through future generations.

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[78] Hume, David. "Of Miracles" in *An Enquiry Concerning Human Understanding and Concerning the Principles of Morals*, (London: Claredon Press) 1748.
[79] Warfield, Benjamin B. *Counterfeit Miracles* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons), 1st ed. 1918.

Appendix: Timeline of Relevant Events

- **July 2nd, 1822**: Pierre de Rudder is born in Jabbeke, Belgium.
- **February 11th, 1858-July 16, 1858**: The Lourdes apparitions of the Virgin Mary are reported by 14-year-old Bernadette Soubirous.
- **February 16th, 1867**: Pierre fractures his left leg in two places during a workplace accident and is attended to by doctors.
- **March 1867**: After several failed surgeries, the broken leg shows signs of discoloration and amputation is recommended but refused by Pierre.
- **Summer 1867**: Weekly salary is rewarded to Pierre by the Viscount. He continues to receive check-ups from local physicians.
- **April 1868**: Pierre is able to move about on crutches and attend weekly mass, but still remains largely bed-bound.
- **December 1871**: Dr. van Hoestenberghe examines Pierre's leg on at least one occasion in 1871 and notes that it is in a poor state with the bone failing to heal. This claim derives from a letter written four years later by the physician on May 12th, 1875.
- **July 26th, 1874**: Pierre's pension is suspended upon the death of the Viscount du Bois. The disabled man is now cared for by his wife and daughters who take on jobs to support him.
- **December 1874-January 1875:** Sources differ as to the frequency of further examinations by van Hoestenberghe, with some of the doctor's writings (derived from journal entries dated to 1875 that were produced in 1899 during the trial) mentioning examinations of the leg in December 1874 and January 1875.
- **April 6th, 1975**: Pierre shows off the wound of his leg to his neighbors, the van Hooren family, who note the bones protruding from the open sore. This is taken from an affidavit signed by the family on April 25th, 18 days following the miracle.
- **April 7th, 1875**: Pierre and his wife are granted permission to travel to the Shrine to Lourdes in Oostakker. Both attest that Pierre received an instantaneous healing as his broken bones are mended together and the wound scars over.
- **April 8th, 1875**: Pierre is examined by his primary surgeon, Dr. Affenaer, who verifies that all signs of the fracture are gone.
- **April 12th, 1875**: Pierre is examined and interrogated by the Bishop Faict.
- **April 15th, 1875**: Affidavit is produced with 13 local signatories testifying to knowing Pierre de Rudder while he was crippled and claiming to have seen him healed.
- **April 15th, 1875**: First letter from Dr. van Hoestenberghe to Bishop Faict attesting to having previously examined Pierre's leg prior to the miracle.
- **April 16th, 1875**: Pierre is interviewed by Chaplain EH Scheerlinck as to the details of his healing. Scheerlinck's findings would be published the following year.
- **April 25th, 1875**: Affidavit signed by Edouard van Hooren, Jules van Hooren, and Marie Wittizacle is produced, which claims that the witnesses saw the ends of Pierre's wound protruding from his wound on April 6th of the year, a day prior to the miracle.
- **May 12th, 1875:** Second letter from Dr. van Hoestenberghe to Bishop Faict where he claims to have examined the leg of Pierre on one occasion around 1871 and found it to have been in poor shape.
- **August 21st, 1892**: Dr. van Hoestenberghe writes to Dr. Gustave Boissiere, head of Lourdes Medical Bureau, to recommend that an investigation takes place regarding the healing of Pierre de Rudder. A formal inquiry is started by the bureau.
- **December 1892**: Several witnesses from Jabbeke testify under oath to having seen the broken ends of Pierre's leg between March 30th-April 6th 1875. A few witnesses who saw Pierre during the day of the pilgrimage on April 7th also testifed that the leg was in poor condition.
- **March 22, 1898**: Pierre de Rudder dies of pneumonia.
- **May 24th, 1899**: The legs of Pierre de Rudder's skeleton are exhumed upon the request of Dr. van Hoestenberghe and Canon Alfred De Meester.

- **December 11th, 1907:** Dr. van Hoestenberghe testifies before the tribunal that he had examined the leg on many occasions, the latest observations four to five months before the date of the miracle (app. Dec 1874-Jan 1875) and found it to be severely broken.
- **July 25th, 1908**: Investigation formally concludes and Pierre de Rudder is posthumously certified as the 8th miracle of Lourdes.
- **1908-1910:** The Lourdes healing is discussed in a number of medical journals and the public as to ensure the miracle's legitimacy.
- **1910**: The Medical Society of Milan hosts a physician's conference in which the healing of Pierre de Rudder is hotly debated.
- **1913:** Alfred Deschamps publishes *Le Cas de Pierre de Rudder et les Objections des Médecins* in defense of the Oostakker miracle.
- **1957:** The lost letters from Dr. van Hoestenberghe are discovered and published by Canon De Meester, one of the original promoters during the 1892 investigation, in a book called *De Wonderbare Genezing van Pieter De Rudder; Kanoniek het Onderzoek.*
- **1987:** Belgian writer Adrien Delcour publishes a response to De Meester in *Un Grand Miracle De Lourdes* where he argued that Pierre de Rudder faked the miracle to commit worker's compensation fraud.
- **2010**: Skeptical investigator Joe Nickel publishes a briefer and more popularized summary of Delcour's work in the January-February 2010 edition of the *Skeptical Inquirer*.